



Rowing is growing right here in 'River City'

By Jason Mackey FOR THE

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When Rick Brown moved to Pittsburgh six years ago to take a coaching job with the Three Rivers Rowing Association, he had only a handful of teenagers interested in learning about the sport.

Now, Brown's youth program boasts more than 80 rowers.

Brown, 34, of Squirrel Hill, grew up in Portland, Ore., and went to Bates College in Maine. He has lived and worked in Boston and San Francisco. All were rower-friendly places, Brown said. And it's something he thinks Pittsburgh will be one day.

"The quality, in addition to the growth, has been really awesome to watch," said Brown, who's the executive director of Three Rivers Rowing, which is based out of the Millvale Waterfront Park near the 40th Street Bridge. "Rowing in Pittsburgh is quite honestly pretty young compared to other cities out there, but it's been fun to watch it grow."

Many options exist for those interested in rowing around Pittsburgh, from youth programs through Three Rivers and the Steel City Rowing Club -- the other popular rowing club in the area, located along the Allegheny River in Verona -- to more adult-oriented programs.

Rowing teams offer exercise and opportunity

A high school component does exist, but those teams -- which are not considered part of the WPIAL or PIAA -- often compete alongside club teams, college teams and adult outfits.

Central Catholic is one of the area's most successful teams, with a total of 14 boats, including six eight-person shells, and an operating budget of about \$100,000 annually.

The Vikings regularly seek the best competition, no matter how far the trip. For instance, at the Head of the Ohio Regatta on Oct. 1, the Central Catholic top eight-person boys boat finished in 14 minutes, 9.57 seconds -- faster than the Penn State men's crew team.

"There are so many parts and pieces to this sport," said Dori Tompa, the executive director for Steel

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City Rowing. "Everybody is different. Each athlete can have more natural ability for endurance or power. Some are short, some are tall, and you have to blend them. It's very interesting how complicated it is."

According to Head Coach Jay Hammond, Central Catholic has developed a strong program by relying on athletes who turn to crew as an alternative to more traditional sports.

"I think as parents become increasingly concerned about concussions, you're beginning to get interest from 'traditional sport' people," Hammond said. "Parents are also concerned about limited playing time, and the way we do it, we make sure everybody gets a chance to race."

Teams are traveling significant distances. Central Catholic and a team from Three Rivers Rowing traveled to the Head of the Charles Regatta this past weekend in Boston. And on Saturday, Central Catholic will compete at the Head of the Schuylkill Regatta in Philadelphia, another prestigious race. It's not uncommon for teams to compete indoors during the winter on rowing simulators.

Many girls gravitate toward rowing because of the opportunity for exposure. Crew has only been an NCAA championship sport since 1997, and scholarships are generally more available than in other sports.

"With the money being there for women in college, that's opened up more opportunities within the high school and youth levels because parents and kids see that opportunity," Brown said. "At one point, there were scholarships being given out to kids who had never even rowed."

Sarah Trovato grew up in Sewickley and went to Quaker Valley, becoming enamored with the sport as a freshman. But since the Quakers did not have a crew team, she rowed for Three Rivers and paid about \$600. Eventually, she earned a crew scholarship to Michigan.

"The sport, in general, has grown," said Trovato, who serves as a coach during the summer with Three Rivers. "Robert Morris recently picked up a rowing team. Pitt, Carnegie Mellon and Duquesne have been around for awhile. High school teams have been around, but over the past few years, we've been seeing a lot more speed out of them."

Three Rivers Rowing sponsors a corporate rowing program, where 10 or more employees race one night a week for one or two nine-week seasons during the summer at a cost of \$180 per person, \$1,800 for the team.

Teams are separated by experience, and the racing is usually followed by food and drinks, much like an office softball team.

"Our rivers are being used for more activities like rowing and kayaking, instead of barge traffic," Brown said. "People are starting to view Pittsburgh more and more as a place to get outside."